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The Best Defense

By Osten Dal'Nay, as transcribed by Morrie Mullins

The following story appeared on one of Cularin's holonet nodes. Originally uncredited, rumors quickly began to circulate that it was written by a young Osten Dal'Nay, long before he left the Thaereian Navy to assist in the construction of Cularin's Militia. Within hours, his name was affixed to the story. The appropriateness of doing so remains a matter of some debate.

In the dark, there is no difference between an enemy and a friend. In the midst of a firefight, a blaster bolt from your brother's carbine kills just as surely as a bolt from the followers of a Hutt. Life and death know no relations, never shake hands with you, never wait to see if their arrival is welcome or their departure serene. And the only thing any being can do, when the time comes, is his duty.

Duty, above all.

Nightwing sat on his bunk, disassembling and reassembling his blaster rifle for the fourth time since dinner. He had his legs curled beneath him, knees digging into the mattress, sending creases the length of his once-crisp top sheet. The bunk didn't matter. If he didn't sleep tonight, or if he slept on the floor, it wouldn't kill him. The bunk was a convenience. The blaster rifle, standard Thaereian issue MX9, was the difference between life and death. Only the rifle mattered.

The trigger was jamming, sticking on a bent wire or a spot of grease or something else that he hadn't found in any of his cleaning. Even now, as he slid the pieces of the barrel back into place, giving a quarter-twist to the anterior locking mechanism, he could tell something was wrong. There was grit in the twist, like a single piece of sand in your boot, digging its way through to your skin. Tiny, but no less of a problem because of its small size. He propped the butt of the rifle on his bunk, creating yet another crease he was loathe to let Sergeant Brik see, and checked the action of his trigger. It pulled smoothly enough, but when he released it, it half-jerked and half-slid back into position.

A quarter-twist in the opposite direction released the anterior lock and allowed him to strip the barrel into three parts once more. He laid them across the tan half-moon that served as the standard issue pillow for Thaereian enlisted men and set to disassembling the trigger mechanism once more.

"You, boy - - what do you do?" The voice was thick and phlegmy, with more than a trace of Huttese in its vowels. Nightwing looked up, trigger guard in one hand, trigger relay board in the other, and found himself facing a thick-

joweled Nikto. The pale scar that dripped down the right side of his face made Nightwing think of an acid burn. The bars on the Nikto's shoulders made him think he ought to be saluting. So quickly that he almost upset the parts he'd spread around himself on the bunk, Nightwing was on his feet and at attention.

The Nikto -- a Commander, what was a Commander doing in the enlisted men's quarters? -- sighed, rolled his eyes, and scratched at the long, pale scar on his face.

"You speak?"

"Sir, yes sir, I do. Sir, I apologize for not noticing you came in, sir."

"You focus. I like focus. You try to fix blaster, yes?"

Nightwing glanced at his bunk. It hadn't looked that messy before an officer arrived. Had it?

"Yes, sir. My rifle and I were having a conversation, sir."

An eyebrow went up. "You talk to weapon. Is interesting." He held up a hand. "No more with the 'sir.' I am not come here to have you grovel. Is uninteresting, groveling. I come here because man who stays in quarters when squad on leave, he is not normal man."

Something about the Nikto's tone caught Nightwing off-balance, or if not off-balance, then at least unprepared. "Sir, I -- I apologize." Seconds. It had been just seconds since the Nikto told him not to call him "sir," and the first word out of his mouth had been exactly that.

"No apologies. No grovel. Just speak to me about your conversation. Why you speak to your rifle?"

Was this some sort of test? It had to be. Commanders didn't show up in the enlisted barracks without reason. He had to think quickly. What kind of test could this be?

"My weapon has been malfunctioning. When a weapon malfunctions, it's because there is something wrong with the man who carries it almost as often as the weapon itself." That didn't come out quite right. Sergeant Brik said it better. Of course, Sergeant Brik would have married his rifle had the Navy allowed such things.

"What is malfunction?"

Nightwing had to bite back the urge to say "sir" again. "The trigger has been jamming."

The Commander nodded. "You have cleaned the guard? Oiled the action? Filed the symon tube? Checked the lower quartile? Adjusted the mesobanis timer?"

He had. All of that and more, and everything twice.

"Tell me your name."

Nightwing told him.

"Then I will call you Nightwing. We have no rank here." He took off his uniform jacket and laid it across the foot of Nightwing's bunk. "I am Kulkis. I am soldier like you."

Despite his best efforts, Nightwing couldn't keep his mouth from falling open. Kulkis had command of the Bravedawn, one of the largest troop transports in all of Thaere. His reputation went beyond heavy-handedness; soldiers who had served under him called him "Cruel Kiss," since what seemed like fondness one moment could turn into harsh, unwarranted punishment the next.

If Kulkis noticed Nightwing's reaction, he gave no sign other than a guarded half-smile. He sat down on the edge of the bunk and began flipping the pieces of rifle in his hands, examining each in turn before commencing with a rapid-fire assembly of the weapon. He was done in seconds.

"Why do you join Navy, Nightwing?" Kulkis stared at the rifle, turning it over slowly in his hands. While he'd left the power cell sitting on the bunk, he kept his thick fingers away from the trigger all the same.

"To protect my home." It was the truth. No more, no less. He couldn't afford more or less; if he said too much, or just the wrong word, he might end up scrubbing latrines. Or worse.

"How do you protect?"

Nightwing searched his memory for the words he swore when he joined the Thaereian Navy. "I protect," he said, focusing on each syllable, "by putting myself between innocents and those who would harm them. I serve by allowing my life and my person to be sacrificed, if need be, so that others may live on. I am vigilant while worlds sleep. I am a guardian of borders and an upholder of laws. I am, and will always be, a faithful servant of Thaere and its protectorates."

The rifle bounced on the bunk when Kulkis dropped it and stood, spinning, to face the enlisted man.

"How do you defend?" he snapped. "You protect, you serve, you watch, you guard - - all of these things you do, how are they different than nothing at all?" He leaned closer. His breath stank of rotten meat and sour milk. "How do you defend?"

Nightwing didn't blink. "I defend by actively pursuing those who would harm others." He swallowed. "May I speak freely?"

"I am soldier, like you. Say what you want, soldier."

He took a deep breath. "If you know someone wants to kill you, you don't wait for them to try. You kill them first. If you know someone wants to harm the people or the place you're sworn to protect, you take the fight to them. It's very simple. You defend what you must defend by actively pursuing those who would do it harm." That was what they'd taught him in the Academy, and it made sense. If you could identify a threat, you dealt with it. The best

defense was always offense. Always.

Kulkis tapped a thick-soled boot on the floor. "I wait," he said.

"For what?" He regretted the question almost immediately as he saw anger flash through the Nikto's black eyes.

"I wait," Kulkis growled, "for you to speak truth." He jabbed a finger into Nightwing's shoulder. "You parrot words you hear from officers, from instructors. You know what instructors know?" He poked again. Nightwing took a step back. "Instructors know to teach. This is all. And officers? Why you listen to officers? Officers command ships because ships, they all officers know!" He stepped up and put his horned brow against Nightwing's smooth forehead. Their eyes inches apart, he hissed, "How you defend against superior enemy?"

Then came the whisper, the soft sliding of steel across leather - - the sound of a knife being drawn.

Nightwing moved without thought as Kulkis's arm came up, driving the point of the knife at the back of his head. He twisted down and away, lashing out with his right hand to catch the Nikto's wrist and twist it, to wrench the knife free. The counterstrike from Kulkis's other hand caught him across the face, opened a gash on the bridge of his nose, but he didn't release the hand that held the knife. Using the momentum of the blow to his face, Nightwing spun back and down, sweeping the Nikto's legs from beneath him and sending the thick-bodied Commander to the floor.

For an instant, they both fell, the knife between them, their eyes locked.

Then came the ripping, wet and unpleasant. Then came the stillness. Nightwing looked down at the knife, buried in Commander Kulkis's abdomen, then into the Commander's fading eyes.

"How do you defend against superior enemy?" Blood bubbled between jagged lips.

"You wait until he moves," Nightwing said. His own voice sounded so far away. He knew he should get a medpac. He also knew it wouldn't matter. "When he overextends himself, you strike. Make his strength into his weakness."

A laugh brought more blood from Kulkis's mouth. "Is nothing wrong with man who wields rifle," he murmured, his voice fainter by the word. "Sometimes, is rifle who is wrong. Is broken. Sometimes... is better to not try to fix..."

The words stayed with Nightwing as he wrapped the Commander's body in a sheet and dumped him out the nearest airlock. He knew, as he watched Kulkis drift away, that the words would stay with him for a very long time.